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THE TENDENCIES OF MODERN COMEDY.

BY CHARLES WYNDHAM.

THE features which give distinctive mark to our contemporaneous school of comedy-writing and of comedy-acting involve many subtile and complex elements. It is not possible to discuss all these within the limits which have been prescribed for this paper. So it seems best to sketch some of the more broad and salient aspects which may be supposed to interest the student of the theatre, with stress on such as may be called cumulative—in other words, such as are special and well-defined tendencies.

There has never been a time when the drama has had a stronger hold on the public mind than to-day. The novel and the newspaper have wrested from it certain functions which it was compelled to accept in earlier ages. But in suffering this diminution it has gained rather than lost, and been brought closer home to the hearts and hearths of men. Among all the arts it necessarily stands to the fore as the glass of the tastes and needs of society, its passions and sympathies, its hopes and fears, its errors and virtues. Here human nature looks on its *doppelgänger*. Shakespeare's summary in that *Ilias in nuce* where he describes the end of stage-craft to be "to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature: to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure," fits the play even better than the play-actor.

This is preëminently the case with comedy. Tragedy deals with man in his exceptional moods, concerning itself mainly with the great elemental passions, human nature in a storm, its thunders and lightnings and tempests. Its spirit and methods have changed but little with the progress of time, and the very limitation of the material with which it works denies it much flexibility or power of growth. The tragedy of a past age, so far as we care

for tragedy at all, is far more acceptable to us on the stage than that based on contemporary life; for in the former case it rises more easily into the domain of the ideal. Thus we like it in much the same fashion as we like poetry, and prefer its setting in the library to that behind the footlights. Even Shakespearian tragedy, that consummate flower of human genius, attracts but little as compared with Booth, Salvini, or Irving, who uses it as his vehicle. Those angry and fiery colors, as when

“Some great painter dips
His brush in hues of earthquake and eclipse,”

however they may still burn for us in the world's masterpieces, are not the pigments which limn our pregnant interests and sympathies. Tragedy, as a vital fact of the stage, long since passed its efflorescence.

Comedy, on the other hand, using the word in the larger sense, is immortal, and ever fresh in its growth. It lives with the sap of humanity and fits society like its skin. It rehearses the story of every-day life and manners, and shapes into art the normal, not the extreme and violent, experiences of man. It changes in its form and texture from age to age, from people to people, with Protean ease and quickness. Its pictures of virtue and vice are such as man may easily meet among his fellows in the saloon or in the slums, at the hustings or in the workshops, in the club or at the races, in the streets or in the counting-house, in the church or in the gin-palace. The things represented are imbedded in the special characteristics of the time, and they are caught by art as the sun catches a face on the sensitive plate. This is the significance of good comedy, that it gives us, with a vivid, fresh presentation, warm from crown to finger-tip, the life that we ourselves live, brain-born and heart-born. It may wear a laughing mask, but more often than not a tear trembles near the smile, and a sense of something deep and serious lies close to the flash of mirth.

Thus seriousness of purpose is rapidly becoming a controlling element in modern comedy. The men and women of to-day are profoundly stirred by the varied problems which are pressing society for solution. Demos has raised his head from the nether world, and is asking questions difficult to answer and impossible to evade. Even in the United States, where the workingman has had from the beginning a far better

foothold than elsewhere, his voice is heard with no uncertain sound. The conflict of capital and labor in its varied aspects, trades-unions and syndicates, strikes and lock-outs, makes this tumult felt far and wide. The sexual relation, with the cognate problems of marriage and divorce, offers many strange and perplexing issues. The woman's-rights agitation persistently looks us in the face and cannot be exorcised with either suave words or sneers. The war of religion and science, questions of public education, political and social issues growing out of the drinking habit, and a hundred others (to continue the catalogue would be useless), are knitting themselves into the bone and gristle of the period. Society is getting self-conscious in such dead earnest that it is turning sociological. Frankenstein is confronted, not by the one monster of his own creation, but by many of them, and he is equally fascinated and alarmed by the spectacle of the Titanic brood. Comedy drama can no more help absorbing such questions than plants can help absorbing the quality of the rich dirt in which their roots are hidden. If it were possible that it should be otherwise, it would become as barren and frigid as the stale jokes of the circus clown.

The brilliant comedy of the old English school, surpassingly clever as it is, and flavored with the finest intellectual relish, is losing much of its hold on modern audiences from the frequent lack of a strong central idea. It is only as the background for the genius of a great actor that the public cares a fillip about it. Yet with all its champagne froth and sparkle, the old comedy, when carefully scanned, is rich in evidence enforcing our contention. The period of the Restoration, which began that splendid reign of dramatic wit, was cancered to the core with licentiousness, but wore over it point-lace and diamonds. There were no social problems to solve, or—what amounts to the same thing—nobody was conscious of them. There were but few gradations in life—only sharp transitions. With the sparkling rakes of either sex life was a pure pleasure-hunt, and with Hodge at the plough-tail it was sheer endurance. Brutality in velvet and ruffles swaggered, and brutality in rags sulked. Between the two extremes there were but few interesting types, or, if they existed, they hid in a safe obscurity. Phyllis might be virtuous, the country squire might be honest and manly, the yokel might be loyal, but comedy made them all simple and stupid. The vicious scintil-

lated with brilliancy and wit, and the good were as dull as the rustic mud out of which they grew. The art of the stage mirrored the facts of life. Yet, in defiance of all our moral disgust and lack of sympathy, the exuberant gayety and the flash of give-and-take in the dialogue still enchant us in the reading.

As the age became more earnest, and thought of other things than pleasure, it forced other things into the drama. Virtue, however, in urging her claims, for a long time did it with the strut and rant of the new-comer trying to win recognition in good society. During the whole of the eighteenth century the gradual lift of social and moral life is closely reflected in the work of the stage. When we finally reach the period of Sheridan and Goldsmith, vice may be elegant and insinuating, but it no longer stalks over the stage with a front of brass and the challenge of superiority.

If in the eighteenth century the hue and tone of society, with those interests most to the front, were faithfully reflected in dramatic art alike in its spirit and methods, we may expect our modern comedy to be equally true to its purpose. The deep social issues which had their birth in the French Revolution, and have more recently reached such a tremendous growth under the stimulus of the industrial arts and sciences, are convulsing thought, and this generation is caught in the very thick of the fray. New classes, new responsibilities and duties, new ideals, new dangers, new needs, keep touch with us in season and out of season, at home and in the street, in the business office and in the political assembly. They are beginning to take hold of comedy with a masterful hand. They are sure before long to assert a stronger lordship.

Let us glance for a moment at two plays recently produced in England, "The Profligate," by Pinero, and "Wealth," by Jones. Both pieces have excited great interest, and are such notable examples of the fresh force moving in dramatic art that a more intimate study of their peculiarities will not be amiss. In "The Profligate" the happiness of two is wrecked by the shadow of an almost-forgotten crime, and the folly is exhaustively discussed of believing that the happiness of a pure, young, virtuous woman is safe in the hands of a reformed rake. In "Wealth" we see how the absorbing love of gain destroys gradually our best feelings, distorts our natures, breeds misery at our

domestic hearth, instead of happiness, and can even shatter the reason of its victim. In all these the motive is subjective, and at a comparatively recent date in the history of the stage would have been deemed quite unsuited to dramatic treatment. Not only are these problems made to live in the action and passions of the people of the play, but they are elaborately discussed between the characters, sometimes with lengthy argument that reaches monologue. Crowded audiences, made up of the best people in London, were attracted for more than three months by these dramatic debates, and the hold of the play on the public was unmistakable.

The success of Henrik Ibsen's comedies in Germany and England, as well as in the Scandinavian countries, is a still more striking illustration of the tendency of the play of serious purpose to dominate comedy-writing. The great Norwegian dramatist has been described by his friend Georg Brandes as a hot-hearted pessimist, at odds with existing conditions, yet with full faith in the possibilities of the future, believing that all social wrongs will finally be removed by an inner revolution of the spirit of the present or of some future age. His passion for the development of individualism as the panacea for the great world-sickness of evil is intense, and is in some sense the key with which he would unlock every problem. The two plays, "A Doll's House" and "Ghosts," which have been produced with great success in London, created a deep and genuine stir.

The former may be noted somewhat in detail to serve the present purpose, though it has been so widely discussed in magazine and newspaper that doing this may be a supererogation. *Nora Helmer*, the heroine of the comedy, is an inexperienced and frivolous woman, who has, notwithstanding, resources of undeveloped strength. She is introduced to us as a wife who has been trained to accept her husband as her law and conscience. She commits a forgery to save his life and spare her old father misery, believing this to be the burden of duty imposed on her, and expecting *Helmer's* loving recognition of it. That he fails of this in true measure, but only forgives her for sinning against the law and expects her to resume that ignorance and dependence which had made her his submissive pupil, revolts the child now suddenly burst into the woman. He had not been willing to take on his shoulders the burden of the crime committed for him. Had he risen to that

stature, she would have died for him. But now they must separate is the decree of the doll wife. Her instinct tells her in this crisis that only by keeping her own individuality sacred could she insure the personal salvation of herself and *Helmer*. Holding him at arm's length would give both room to grow, and then, perchance, they might come together, equals in true union, each complementing the other. However fantastic the conclusion, we recognize in Ibsen's subtle and delicate treatment the gist of the great woman-question and an earnest groping after light, the lack of which darkens many a household. That such a play as "The Doll's House" could so powerfully affect English audiences is significant in showing the set of the current, even after making all allowances for the excellence of dramatic treatment.

In a recent professional visit to Germany, I saw a play which had been adapted from the Spanish and which made a vivid impression on the throngs who visited the theatre. This comedy had ample stage-worth in construction, but the feature which made it vital and a matter of widespread talk was the purpose hinted in the first act and carried through with widening revelation to the last drop-curtain. The play of "Galeotto" illustrated the social truth that scandal, though without reason, tends by its very existence to create the substance of fact, of which it was in the outset only the lying semblance. No spectator of the social battle so often waged with poisoned missiles lacks knowledge of parallels in real life.

One need not stop with the typical plays of purpose. There are but few strong pieces within recent years which have really got a mastery over the public, without tap-roots in questions of social need. All that need be made emphatic is that the tendency to work the field of serious comedy flows with increasing strength. The French school of comedy-writing, generally conceded to be a model in method, has busied itself greatly for many years with the attempt to answer social problems. The mere mention of the names of such dramatists as Dumas, Sardou, and Daudet suffices to recall to our theatre-goers a dozen familiar examples. The modern literature of the stage in Germany would be no less prolific in illustration, were it needed, as might be expected in the case of a thinking, sincere, and strong-minded race.

It goes without saying that as long as human nature remains the same it will take delight in wholesome fun behind the foot-

lights. The charm of gayety and mirth from elegant comedy to rollicking burlesque is immortal. The medicine of laughter heals many a human ill, and the brief nepenthe which the stage so often gives to overburdened minds could never be spared from its varied sources of beneficence. Yet with all the smiles and gambols of the laughing god, he must yield precedence in the pantheon of art to the deity who presides over the sorrows as well as the joys of men.

The sister-art of the novel has given birth to many masterpieces, which have been begotten by the desire to enforce a moral. The drama, however, has been in large degree the slave of the canon, "Art for art's sake," in the minds of most writers and actors. In obedience to this law each character must be, as it were, stripped to the skin. Not a word must be uttered which does not in some material way help the action of the story and give effect to a situation. The dialogue is compressed into brief sentences, and kept strictly within those limits which are prescribed by an iron theory. The author works in a strait-jacket, if his heart burns with some truth which he wishes to utter. On the one hand is set the reality that swift movement, action like the rush of the bullet to its mark, exhilarates like strong wine. To this must be added the fact that the drama must necessarily deal with the concrete, not with the abstract; with personalities, not with speculation.

On the other hand stands the truth that opinion and sentiment give keener edge and relish to action, and that what people do on the stage acquires a higher distinction from the glimpses which we are permitted to get of the domain which lies behind the flashing eye, the laugh, the frown, or the sneer. The windows can only be opened wide by speech. What can be done in this revelation of the inner world of man, without crippling the energy of action, is shown by the great Elizabethans. The tendency, as has been intimated, is to give to the drama of to-day a larger share of the factor of speech.

What is the *modus vivendi* by which apparently alien features can be made to coalesce? It must be found no less in the art of the actor than in that of the dramatist. It is no heresy to say that the best acting does not belong to the drama of action. Some players act with their temperaments, some with their brains, some with both. There is more than one clever player

with a well-won reputation who puts no more thinking brains into his art than would fitly go to the Neanderthal skull. In some cases, indeed, the law of heredity almost bourgeons into genius by sheer force of temperamental power.

A really noble delivery is now the rarest gift in the actor's equipment, partly, perhaps, because he has had but little comparative use for it. It is this, however, which lays the heaviest tax on mentality in acting ; and with the fresh departure in comedy the task of the player, while more difficult because more intellectual, will be raised to a finer ideal. The long speeches which the French stage gives to the actor have wrought a school of natural and beautiful declamation which enchants an audience even more than the movement of the story. To deliver a goodly succession of lines with fire, smoothness, and simplicity, and with their full pregnancy of meaning, belongs to the actor's best art, as was fully enforced in the injunction of the great master to whom we must all hark back for definitions.

Another tendency of modern comedy is toward realism. This need not banish the creative or poetic element from the playwright's workshop. To draw people as they are and evolve out of their ordinary lives and interests a story which shall lay a spell equal to that of romance—no writer surely could have a higher ambition or a more arduous one. To call a spade a spade, to banish sham and humbug from dramatic delineation, to paint the very lines and wrinkles into character as the actor paints his stage-face, to avoid exaggeration of treatment and incident, appear to be the growing bias. Howells, James, and others have set this fashion in novel-writing, and a similar drift in the stage runs parallel to its disposition to discuss the serious problems of the time. That hardness of outline which generally threatens the realist should find its corrective in a characteristic of our age. The social law is repression and reticence. Men mask or control their passions, and cultivate restraint as the crowning grace of good manners. The student of his kind finds keen interest in noting the pull of passion and enthusiasm chafing at the bit, and the play of impulse constrained by decorum. These half-lights make each one a pleasing mystery to his neighbor and contribute an endless variety of tone for the use of the painter of character and manners. Suggestiveness is recognized as one of the most potential forces in art, and it may be made to suffuse the most

realistic figure summoned out of life by the skill of the playwright with the charm of imaginative work.

The tendency of the comedy to realism has its effect in shaping the methods of the comedian. There was a time, not so very many years since, when the plays most in vogue permitted the player the use of a dozen conventional moulds, in any one of which he could shut himself up, like a man in armor, and walk on the stage a lively, talking puppet. Nowadays each fresh character exacts study and adaptation founded on a penetrating study of people who are playing their parts in real life. Those shades of distinction which differentiate men and women who resemble each other most closely, must not be neglected on the stage, to do justice to realistic comedy. Players have learned a lesson, too, from the restraint and self-command shown in actual society. No comedian who aims at the highest effects under the coming *régime* can begin too soon to master that sort of intensity which is bought with suppression and a studied moderation of method. The actor who tries to express everything succeeds in expressing nothing and hits in the air. The imagination of the audience, give it half a chance, will fully complete what he leaves artfully unsaid or undone. This kind of stage-craft strikes home, and the tendencies of the stage appear to foster it in many ways. The evidence seems to point to the conclusion that the future of the comedy will develop a finer quality of art in the player and give a higher intellectualism to the profession.

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